

Romans 2:12-29

Why You're Dying and What You Can Do About It

Main idea: All have sinned, and the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

I read a story about two little mischievous boys, ages 8 and 10. They were always getting into trouble, and their parents knew that if any mischief occurred in their town, it was probably one of her sons. So, not knowing where to turn, their mother turned to her pastor. She asked him to come and talk with them, and maybe remind them that God is everywhere and see what they do. So the pastor came to her home and sat down with the younger boy and their mother, and asked the boy, "Where is God?"

The boy immediately looked very concerned, but he made no response. So the pastor repeated the question. "Where is God?" Again, the boy made no attempt to answer. So the boy's mom spoke up and asked sternly, "Boy, your pastor asked you a question! Where is God?" And the boy responded, "I don't know! Ask my brother!" And then he bolted from the room and ran to his brother's room.

When his older brother saw him come in upset, he asked him, "What happened?" The younger brother, gasping for breath, replied: "You're in real BIG trouble this time! God is missing, and they think you did it!"

To be honest, I secretly get a little satisfaction out of blaming others or pointing out the failings of others. I'm not proud of it, but when I

can point out that somebody else messed up, that kind of makes me feel good a little bit, because I'm not the one to blame in that circumstance. If you're honest, you might find that this is true of you, also. I think when we can point out the faults of others, we think in our pride, "I ain't so bad, because they're obviously worse!"¹

But for the past two weeks, we've seen from the book of Romans that God's wrath is rightly upon all people, because no one is without excuse before God.² God is righteous and holy, and we've all sinned against Him in various ways.³ So God would be perfectly just to allow us all to perish and spend eternity in hell.⁴

Because of that, we might all fall into despair. Since we're all sinners, and God punishes sin, we might all start to fear that we're beyond hope and that there's nothing we can do so that we would go to heaven. And we'd actually be right about a lot of that. There's nothing we can do.⁵

But our passage this morning is about how even though all the world, all nations are in danger of perishing in hell because there's nothing we can do, God Himself did something. He sent Jesus.⁶ Jesus did what we could not do, so that we could spend eternity with Him in heaven.⁷ That's the gospel. In short, we sin, but Jesus saves.⁸

¹ And in blaming others, we may actually be blaming God. Genesis 3:12-13

² Romans 1:20

³ Romans 3:23

⁴ John 3:18, 3:36

⁵ Salvation is by faith alone, not by works. Ephesians 2:8-9

⁶ John 3:16

⁷ Romans 8:3-4

⁸ Romans 6:23

That's the point of our Scripture passage today: we sin, but Jesus saves. So let's begin reading with Romans 2:12-16.

For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. (Romans 2:12-16)

Father, You see us completely. We can't have any secrets hidden from You. You see us completely, with all our sins, and all our pains, and You love us anyway. So help us to trust in Your love. Help us to trust in Jesus. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Have you ever accidentally done something that worked out perfectly, even though it could have ended in disaster?

A few years back, we were driving home from Chicago, and I really should have gotten gas before we left the city. But I didn't. I didn't think about what I should have done, I just did what I wanted to do. I wanted to get on the road, and get home. And before I knew it, the car was telling me that I was low on gas, and then the fuel estimate in the car let me know that I was 0 miles until empty.

[Picture of 0 miles left]



I think I drove on 0 miles left for at least 5, maybe 10 miles. But by God's grace alone, I was able to make it to a gas station to fill up. That could have ended in disaster, right? I could have run out of gas in the middle of nowhere! Has that ever happened to you?

Or maybe you did the exact same thing, and it didn't work out so well for you. That's what happens when we just trust our gut. Sometimes it works out, and sometimes it doesn't.

It's interesting that in our Scripture passage this morning, Paul goes on this tangent about Gentiles (that's us) possibly being able to do what the Old Testament law requires, even though they didn't read or respect the Old Testament law. They weren't aware of what God wanted them to do, and even if they were, they didn't care. So my initial reaction is to say, "Uh, no Paul, you're wrong. Gentiles couldn't be perfect anymore than Jews could be perfect." Everything we've read in the book of Romans up to now emphasized this truth that we've all sinned, and we're all equally in danger of God's wrath.⁹

But I think what Paul is trying to teach is that whether or not we read the Old Testament law, whether or not we read the Bible is, in

⁹ Especially Romans 1:18-2:11

a way, irrelevant. It doesn't matter whether or not you know the law. It matters whether or not you obey the law.¹⁰

So let's say you go out this afternoon, get on route 16 towards Pana and drive 95 miles an hour, and a cop pulls you over. If you say to the police officer, "I'm sorry, officer, I didn't know what the speed limit was," what would he tell you? Yeah! He'd say, "Well, you shouldn't have been going 90, that's for sure!"

But let's say you're driving on route 16, and you don't know what the speed limit is, but you drive 55 miles an hour because that just feels right, are you going to get pulled over? No! Because even though you didn't know the speed limit, you naturally went the speed limit.

That's kind of like what Paul's saying when he says that Gentiles, even if we don't even read the Old Testament, will be either accused or excused on the day of judgment. We all have a conscience, and that conscience, while not perfect because of our sin,¹¹ is definitely influenced by God's absolute moral truth, because we're all made in the image of God.¹² So we know that murder is wrong. And we know that rape is wrong. And we know that loving one another is right, even if we never read the Bible.

Now, please hear me. I'm not saying we should just live however we feel like living, and just hope that we're living the right way. And I'm not saying it's not important to read the Bible. It's extremely important. Because that's how we know with more certainty what

¹⁰ James 1:22-25

¹¹ John 8:34

¹² Genesis 1:26-27

God wants us to do.¹³ And even more important, it's how we know the gospel, how God saves us when we fail to do what He wants us to do.¹⁴

I'm just saying that when it comes to this passage in Romans, Paul is clear that whether or not you look to the law, the Old Testament, or even the Bible as a whole, as your moral guide, the Bible is clear that we're all condemned to perish. He wrote in verse 12, "For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law." So the simple truth is that we've all proven by our lives that we're deserving of death and hell, and we can't possibly do enough good to undo that.¹⁵

I don't know if it's true or not, but I read a story about a convict who escaped from the Albany penitentiary in New York. After years of searching for him, the detective assigned to his case finally tracked him down and caught up with him in a drugstore in California. As the escaped convict began to make his purchase, the detective walked up behind him, laid his hand on the man's shoulder and said, "You're under arrest; come with me!"

Appearing stunned, the man asked the detective, "What did I do?"

The detective calmly replied, "You know what you did. You escaped from the Albany penitentiary several years ago. You went west, got married, and then came here to live, thinking you could start a new life. But I found you."

¹³ Psalm 119:105

¹⁴ Romans 1:16

¹⁵ Isaiah 64:6

Quietly the man admitted, "That's true, but I've changed. I haven't broken a law in all these years, and now I have a family who will be very confused. So before you take me in, could we stop by my house so I can talk to my family?" Against his better judgment, the detective agreed. When they got to his home, the man looked at his wife and asked, "Haven't I been a kind husband and a good father? Haven't I worked hard to make a living?"

His wife answered, "Of course you have, but why are you asking me these questions?" The detective then explained what had happened and how her husband was now under arrest. Apparently, the escaped convict had hoped that his record as the perfect husband and father would impress the detective, and he would be let go. But even though he was right with his family, he was still all wrong with the state of New York.

And the truth is, no matter how much good we do, we've all already broken God's law, and we can be saved only by God's grace.

You see, one of the biggest problems with how people usually think about Christianity is that we think it's primarily about how we live. Many people think Christianity is about living like a goody-two shoes, or going to church, or giving money to church. But that's not what Christianity is all about. Christianity is about recognizing how we've all messed up big time in all of these areas and so many more, and how Jesus came from heaven to rescue us.¹⁶ Christianity is not about what we do, but about what Jesus has done for us.

¹⁶ Luke 19:10

And if we make it about what we need to do, we've missed the point.

And that applies to every single one of us, even the people that you might look up to the most. Verse 17.

But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." (Romans 2:17-24)

In these verses, Paul is pointing out that even those of us who teach God's law are still guilty of breaking it. I think this is what's often left out or miscommunicated when we share our faith with others. It's why so many people think Christians are judgmental. And I think we sometimes fail to share it because we conveniently forget that it's true.

Rather than acknowledging that we're in the same boat as those we disagree with, we'd rather think that we're just slightly better than them. I've heard this many times over the years. When we're

talking about certain sins, I hear Christians say, “I’d never do that,” and they say it with this look of disgust on their faces. “I’d never do that.” And what they’re subtly saying is, “I’m better than people who do that.”

And when I say “they,” I mean “we.” Because even if you don’t say those words, we’ve all had those thoughts.

But maybe right now you’re thinking, “Pastor, I’d never do that...” Well, I encourage you to just think about that a second.

So when I preach against sin, I’m not at all saying that I’m not a sinner. As your pastor, when I instruct you to live a certain way according to God’s word, I’m not at all saying that I do that perfectly, or even better than you. I’m simply pointing all of us to the standard that God Himself has set for us.¹⁷

And it’s true that we’re called to point others to live by that standard also. We are to be a guide to those who are blind. We are to be a light to those who are in darkness. Because if we’ve seen the light of Jesus, we want to shine that light wherever we go.¹⁸ We want others to see Jesus in us, so that they would lay down their own pride, and receive Jesus. Because without Jesus, all our good works can’t possibly outweigh the sins we’ve already committed. So we need to point people to Jesus with love and humility, not by thinking we’re somehow better than them.

Verse 25.

¹⁷ Matthew 5:48

¹⁸ Matthew 5:15

For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God. (Romans 2:25-29)

I've kind of danced this subject in the past because it's a little uncomfortable for a guy to talk about. But circumcision, of course, is the medical procedure performed on baby boys. Without getting too graphic, it's the cutting off of part of his flesh. And while circumcision has certain health benefits, such as lower risks of urinary tract infections, it's an elective procedure today because most doctors agree that it's not absolutely necessary with modern sanitary practices.¹⁹

But all that aside, in this context, it's used as the symbol of obeying the law. Circumcision was the sign of attempting to obey all of God's law, because, really, a man would only get circumcised if they were really (and I mean, REALLY) committed to God, or at least wanting to prove to themselves and to God that they were.

¹⁹ <https://www.columbiaurology.org/staywell/circumcision>

In the church today, a similar symbol would be baptism. A lot of people think baptism is what gets you to heaven, but the Bible is clear that it's only a symbol.²⁰ It's a very important symbol, which illustrates how we're reborn as new creations and our sins are washed away, and yet, it's still just a symbol.

Baptism can't save us. Trying really really hard to obey God's law can't save us, because we've already sinned. We can't take that back. And ignorance of the law isn't a defense. We're all guilty, and the sentence is death.²¹

So what do we do about this? What do we do with the knowledge that we're all perishing? The answer is simple: get circumcised. Not of the flesh, but of the Spirit, as it says in verse 29.

But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God. (Romans 2:29)

In other words, allow God to cut away that which hurts the most: your pride. Your striving. Anything and everything that tempts you to make life all about you. Because life is not about you. It's about God. So give God all the glory.

This is why Jesus went to the cross. A lot of people criticize God's method in forgiving sins. But Jesus went to the cross, in part, to show you just how much we messed up. We messed up so much

²⁰ 1 Peter 3:21

²¹ Genesis 2:17

that the only way God saw it fit to forgive us was for Jesus, the Son of God, and God in flesh, to die in our place.²²

So, if I were to sum up the message today in one sentence, it would be this: All of us have sinned, and the wages of sin is death. But the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And if I were to sum up the message today in just five words, it would be these: We sin, but Jesus saves.

²² Romans 5:8, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Hebrews 9:22